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GRAMMAR BASED ON ERRORS

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Everywhere we hear the cry and general complaint of unpreparedness in English. We complain that boys and girls enter high school without knowing the fundamentals of English grammar; or that, if they know them, they do not make use of their knowledge in their speech and in their composition. They have failed to form habits of good English. Whose fault is it? What have the high-school teachers of English done to prevent this unpreparedness? What suggestions have they made to the grade teachers? What investigations have they carried on?

The fault, if there be one, lies not only in the teaching but also in the subject-matter. Often the grade teacher realizes the shortcomings of her course of study in grammar, but her hands are tied; she must teach what is given her to teach. Help must come from another source.

Several attempts have been made recently to solve the grammar problem. Of these one of the most interesting is the study made in Kansas City under the direction of Professor W. W. Charters, who believes that the child is burdened with too much technical grammar. When we study the history of language, we find that grammar came late in its development. It is an analysis of language made by the scholars not during its growth but after its growth. The student of English appreciates the fine distinctions of grammar; but to the eleven-year-old boy and girl they are meaningless. However, the plea is not to abandon all technical grammar, but to eliminate what the child does not need, and of what is left to emphasize those parts that he needs most.

There are three reasons for knowing grammar, three points of view from which grammar may be considered worth while. In the

first place, grammar may be worth knowing for its own sake; that is, one should know a noun when one sees it. Secondly, one may study grammar in order to learn how to discriminate closely, how to think clearly. Or, one may study grammar to enable one to speak correctly. This third point of view is the one taken in this study. To find out what the child needs in order to speak correctly, it is necessary to find out what mistakes he makes, what rules of grammar he violates. For need we spend time teaching the child the rules that he never breaks? In teaching him the rules that he breaks it becomes necessary, also, to teach him those other rules that he needs in order to understand the rules that he breaks. If, for instance, he says, "He don't," he must be taught the rule of the agreement of subject and verb in number and person. This will necessitate knowing what a subject is, what a verb is, what number and person are, and what the present tense forms of the verb "do" are.

To find out, then, the child's actual errors, Professor Charters had collected in Kansas City, Missouri, every bit of written work—spontaneous written work only—of all the children of the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades in the city, for a period of four weeks.¹ No dictated nor corrected work was handed in. The children were not urged to be extraordinarily careful or neat; they might use any kind of paper, and either pencil or pen. The children did not know that their papers were collected for a purpose. Besides this written work, the teachers and principals recorded for a week all oral errors heard in the classroom, in the hall, or on the playground. All this material was then sent to Columbia, Missouri, to be tabulated.

We shall speak of the oral errors first. There were found to be twenty-one different classes of error in the total of 5,883 errors collected; these were listed by Miss Edith Miller in Table A of the complete report.

When the tabulation of the written errors was begun, Miss Miller and her assistants soon found it unnecessary to read through the many hundred pages of material collected. As the study was to be of the grammar grades in particular, only sixth- and

¹ Kansas City has no eighth grade.

TABLE A
THE WORKING LIST FOR ORAL ERRORS USED BY TABULATORS AND THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF EACH KIND OF ERRORS

	Error	Illustration	Total Errors	Percentage of Error
1.....	Subject of verb not in nominative case	<i>Us</i> girls went.	253	4
2.....	Predicate nominative not in nominative case	They were John and <i>him</i> . It is <i>me</i> .	118	2
3.....	Object of verb or preposition not in objective case	She gave it to Martha and <i>I</i> .	85	1
4.....	Wrong form of noun or pronoun	<i>Sheeps—theirself</i> . The problem <i>what</i> is.	106	2
5.....	First personal pronoun standing first in a series	<i>Me</i> and <i>him</i> .	108	2
6.....	Failure of the pronoun to agree with its noun in number, person, and gender	Nobody can do what <i>they</i> like.	20	0
7.....	Confusion of demonstrative adjective and personal pronoun	<i>Them</i> things	190	3
8.....	Failure of verb to agree with its subject in number and person	There <i>is</i> six. You <i>was</i> .	831	14
9.....	Confusion of past and present tenses	She <i>give</i> us four. He <i>ask</i> me.	93	2
10.....	Confusion of past tense and past participle	I <i>seen</i> . I <i>have saw</i> .	1,426	24
11.....	Wrong tense-form	<i>Attacked; had ought</i>	204	5
12.....	Wrong verb	<i>Lay</i> for <i>lie; aint</i> <i>go</i> ; confusion of <i>can</i> and <i>may</i> , <i>shall</i> and <i>will</i>	732	12
13.....	Incorrect use of mood	If I <i>was</i> in your place.	20	0
14.....	Incorrect comparison of adjectives	<i>Joyfulest; beautifuler; more better; worser</i>	38	1
15.....	Confusion of comparatives and superlatives	She is the <i>tallest</i> (of two).	9	0
16.....	Confusion of adjectives and adverbs	He looked up <i>quick</i> . That <i>there</i> book.	263	4
17.....	Misplaced modifier	He <i>only</i> went two miles.	17	0
18.....	Double negative	He <i>isn't hardly</i> old enough.	632	11
19.....	Confusion of preposition and conjunction	He talks <i>like</i> he is sick.	14	0
20.....	Syntactical redundancy	Mother <i>she</i> said so. Where is it <i>at</i> ?	593	10
21.....	Wrong part of speech due to similarity of sound	I would of known. <i>They</i> for <i>there</i> .	41	1

seventh-grade papers were read. Furthermore, the papers of only twelve schools were graded. It was found that after the first few schools had been graded, there was no material change either in the number of classes of error or in the percentage. The study of the last six schools served chiefly as a check upon the work. The twelve schools that were chosen included one in the Polish and Russian-Jewish quarter, and one attended by many children of Mexican parentage; others were in strictly American districts. The work, then, was representative.

Table E of the report shows what written errors in grammar were found. The first twenty-one are the same as are listed in Table A; the six that are added are errors that would not appear in oral work, or errors that are not easily detected in conversation. Errors in capitalization were also tabulated. The rules that should be taught were found to be: "Every sentence begins with a capital letter," and "Proper nouns, and adjectives derived from them, should begin with capital letters."

A more detailed account of this study is given in the University of Missouri *Bulletin* of January, 1915, Education Series 9.

A continuation of this study was undertaken by the writers of this article last spring. The account given above applies to the sixth and seventh grades only. The second study deals with the errors in grammar and in composition found in the written work done in the third grade. Papers were collected as before and the errors tabulated as before with perhaps a slightly different purpose. Whereas in the first study the object was to find out both what errors were made and the relative frequency of these errors, in the second study it was chiefly the tabulation of the mistakes that was desired.

Papers were examined until no new errors appeared. Only 112 pages of written material were read; consequently the relative frequency of the errors may be inaccurate. There is, however, a striking correspondence between the first report and the second. This tends to show that all children make certain mistakes more frequently than others.

The entire list of errors was divided into three parts and classified as (1) punctuation, (2) language, and (3) grammar. The line

TABLE E
THE WORKING LIST OF WRITTEN ERRORS USED BY TABULATORS AND THE NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF EACH KIND OF ERROR

	Error	Illustrations	Totals	Percentage	Percentage of First 21
1.....	Subject of verb not in nominative case	<i>Us</i> girls went.	42	0	1
2.....	Predicate nominative not in nominative case	They were John and <i>him</i> . It is <i>me</i> .	49	0	1
3.....	Objective of verb or preposition not in objective case	She gave it to you and <i>I</i> .	48	0	1
4.....	Wrong form of noun or pronoun	<i>Sheeps—themselves</i>	655	5	16
5.....	First personal pronoun standing first in a series	<i>Me and him</i>	25	0	1
6.....	Disagreement of noun and pronoun in number, person, and gender	I saw a man <i>which</i>	162	1	4
7.....	Confusion of demonstrative adjective and personal pronoun	<i>Them</i> chickens	3	0	0
8.....	Failure of verb to agree with its subject in number and person	You <i>was</i> . He <i>don't</i> .	753	6	19
9.....	Confusion of past and present tenses	She <i>give</i> us four. He <i>ask</i> me.	474	4	12
10.....	Confusion of past tense and past participle	I <i>had went</i> . I <i>seen</i> it.	188	2	5
11.....	Wrong tense-forms	I <i>clumb</i> a tree. They <i>drug</i> the road.	198	2	5
12.....	Wrong verb	Set for <i>st</i> ; <i>lay</i> for <i>lie</i> ; <i>learn</i> for <i>teach</i> ; confusion of <i>can</i> and <i>may</i> , <i>will</i> and <i>shall</i>			
13.....	Incorrect use of mood	If I <i>was</i> in your place	265	2	7
14.....	Incorrect comparison of adjectives	<i>Wonderfulest</i> —more better	61	0	2
15.....	Confusion of comparatives and superlatives	<i>Best</i> (of two)	12	0	0
16.....	Confusion of adjectives and adverbs	<i>This here</i> book. Do that <i>quick</i> .	8	0	0
17.....	Misplaced modifier	I <i>only</i> have one.	253	2	6
18.....	Double negative	I <i>can't</i> see <i>nothing</i> . <i>Aren't</i> hardly any.	225	2	6
19.....	Confusion of prepositions and conjunctions	He talks <i>like</i> he is sick.	58	0	1
20.....	Syntactical redundancy	Papa <i>he</i> said I might.	53	0	1
21.....	Wrong part of speech due to similarity of sound	<i>to (two, too); there (their)</i>	467	4	11
22.....	Failure to put period at end of statement	.....	1,334	11	.....
23.....	Failure to put question mark at end of question	.....	3,600	30	.....
24.....	Failure to put apostrophe to denote possession	.....	208	2	.....
25.....	Omission of subject	.....	744	6	.....
26.....	Omission of predicate	.....	313	3	.....
27.....	Confusion of dependent and independent clauses	.....	297	2	.....
		.....	1,059	9	.....

of division between the two latter was an arbitrary one; grammar and language overlap, and some points may belong to either or to both. We felt that the line of division was of no great importance in this case.

PUNCTUATION: 55 PER CENT

	Total Percentage	Sub-total Percentage
I. Mistakes in the use of capital letters	22	
A. Common nouns capitalized		4.0
B. Pronouns capitalized		0.2
C. Verbs and other words wrongly capitalized. . .		2.0
D. Capital omitted at beginning of sentence. . . .		8.0
E. Capital omitted in proper names		4.0
F. Capital omitted in titles		0.4
G. Capital omitted in quotations		0.5
H. Pronoun "I" not capitalized		0.2
I. Capital omitted in salutation*
J. Capital in middle of sentence		3.0
II. Mistakes in the use of the period	10	
A. Period omitted at end of sentence		8.0
B. Period used in middle of sentence		1.0
C. Period omitted after titles and abbreviations		1.0
III. Mistakes in the use of the comma	11	
A. Comma omitted in series of clauses		0.1
B. Comma omitted in series of words		0.4
C. Comma omitted after dependent clauses		4.0
D. Comma omitted after introductory words		0.2
E. Comma omitted after word of address		0.4
F. Comma omitted after parenthetical expressions		0.1
G. Comma omitted before a quotation		2.0
H. Comma used when not necessary		0.7
I. Comma used at end of sentence		1.0
J. Comma omitted before "for" and "so"		0.3
K. Comma omitted between city and state		0.7
L. Comma omitted before or after an appositive. .		1.0
IV. Mistakes in the use of the interrogation point . . .	0.6	
A. Interrogation point omitted		0.1
B. Interrogation point used when not necessary. .		0.5
V. Mistakes in the use of the exclamation point . . .	0.1	
A. Exclamation point omitted		0.1
VI. Mistakes in the use of the semicolon	2.0	

* Less than 0.1 per cent.

	Total Percentage	Sub-total Percentage
A. Semicolon omitted		1.9
B. Semicolon used in wrong place		0.1
VII. Mistakes in the use of quotation marks	2.1	
A. Quotation marks omitted		2.0
B. Quotation marks used in wrong place		0.1
VIII. Mistakes in the use of the apostrophe	6.0	
A. Apostrophe omitted in possessive nouns		3.9
B. Apostrophe omitted in contractions		1.9
C. Apostrophe used when not necessary		0.2
IX. Mistakes in the use of the colon	0.6	
A. Colon omitted		0.6
X. Mistakes in the use of the hyphen	0.6	
A. Hyphen omitted		0.1
B. Hyphen used in wrong place		0.5
LANGUAGE. 17 PER CENT		
XI. Violation of Unity	6.0	
A. Sentences too short for unity:		
1. A dependent clause written as though it were an independent clause		1.0
2. A phrase written as though it were a sen- tence		0.2
3. The subject of one sentence given in the preceding sentence		0.1
B. Sentences too long for unity		4.7
XII. Lack of coherence due to	4.0	
A. Omission of nouns		0.7
B. Omission of verbs		1.0
C. Omission of relative pronouns		0.7
D. Omission of prepositions		0.4
E. Omission of personal pronouns		0.4
F. Omission of conjunctions		0.5
G. Omission of adverbs		0.1
H. Omission of adjectives		0.1
I. Omission of the article		0.1
XIII. Mistakes in paragraphing	1.0	
A. Lack of paragraph division		0.8
B. Wrong indentation		0.1
C. Paragraph for every sentence		0.1
XIV. Syntactical redundancy	4.0	
A. Double construction		0.4

	Total Percentage	Sub-total Percentage
B. Double preposition		0.7
C. "Has got"		0.7
D. Miscellaneous		2.2
XV. Improprieties	0.5	0.5
XVI. Monotonous sentence-structure	0.3	0.3
XVII. Words given wrong position in sentence	0.4	
A. "Only" in wrong place		0.1
B. First personal pronoun placed first in a series		0.3
XVIII. Mistakes in English idiom	0.7	0.7
XIX. Mistakes in logic	0.1	0.1

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XX. Mistakes in verbs	13.0	
A. Wrong form for the third person singular		0.7
B. Mistakes in tense:		
1. Present for past tense		7.0
2. Wrong form of past tense		0.5
3. Confusion of past tense and past participle		2.0
C. Wrong sequence		0.2
D. Wrong verbs		3.0
E. Wrong mode		0.1
F. Wrong infinitive form		0.1
XXI. Mistakes in nouns	1.0	
A. Singular for plural		0.6
B. Plural for singular		0.2
C. Wrong formation of plural		0.2
XXII. Lack of agreement of subject and verb	2.0	
A. Plural subject and singular verb		1.8
B. Singular subject and plural verb		0.2
XXIII. Mistakes in case	2.0	
A. Mistakes in personal pronouns		1.6
B. Mistakes in relative pronouns		0.3
C. Mistakes in possessive nouns		0.1
XXIV. Mistakes in antecedents	1.0	
A. Indefinite antecedents		0.8
B. Singular pronoun with plural antecedent		0.2
XXV. Double negative	0.7	0.7
XXVI. Mistakes in comparison of adjectives	0.3	
A. Double superlative		0.2
B. Wrong comparative form		0.1

	Total Percentage	Sub-total Percentage
XXVII. Confusion of parts of speech	1.0	
A. Adjective for adverb		0.5
B. Adverb for adjective		0.2
C. Pronoun for adjective . . . . .		...
D. Preposition for conjunction		0.2
E. Conjunction for article*
F. Conjunction for adverb*
G. Adjective for noun*
XXVIII. Prepositions wrongly used	2.0	
XXIX. Mistakes due to likeness of sound	5.0	
A. "to" for "too"		0.7
B. "there" for "their"		0.5
C. "their" for "there"		0.4
D. "to" for "two"		0.2
E. "an" for "and"		0.2
F. "where" for "were"		0.2
G. "new" for "knew"		0.2
H. "no" for "know"		0.2
I. "cause" for "because"		0.2
J. "too" for "to"		0.1
K. "the" for "they"		0.1
L. "two" for "too"		0.1
M. Miscellaneous		2.0

These, then, are the errors that the children in the third grade make. You may say that it would be impossible for third-grade children to understand enough of the laws of grammar and composition to avoid making these mistakes. That is true. At the same time, this catalogue of errors should guide us in planning a course of study in language and grammar for the lower and for the intermediate grades. The errors listed should be arranged in the order of their difficulty and apportioned to the grades. Every point of grammar, after being taken up in the proper grade, should be reviewed constantly in the succeeding grades. The errors that the children make are the mistakes that we should strive to correct. The errors listed here are in the main the errors made by the sixth- and seventh-grade children, and they include the most flagrant errors made by high-school Freshmen.

What is to be done? Does this study help to point the way? Does it make the teacher's duty stand out more clearly? We

think it does. If it does nothing more, it shows where to place the emphasis. If these, once more, are the errors that the children make, then the lessons that will tend to correct these mistakes, and the drills that will prevent their occurrence are the lessons and the drills that should form the backbone of all language teaching. They should be regarded as the minimum essentials of the course, and should receive the emphasis throughout the grades. It may be interesting to note in this connection that in the second study it was found that over half, 55 per cent, of the mistakes made were errors in punctuation.

We do not maintain that following the suggestions given above will bring about such a transformation in the children that enter our Freshman English classes that we shall not need to teach them any grammar; but we do affirm that it will do much to improve their speech and their written work. They will have a more adequate foundation in grammar, which will show itself in purer speech and in better-organized and more coherent composition. Should this be accomplished, the high-school teacher of English might feel at liberty to introduce the more difficult points of grammar and composition, both oral and written. Let us, then, do all we can to bring about a sane grammar course for the elementary school.